



Romero Salvado, P. (2015, May 1). Could the Spanish Republic Have Defeated Nationalist Rebels if not for Outside Interference?.
<http://worldatwar2.abc-clio.com/>

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Could the Spanish Republic Have Defeated Nationalist Rebels if not for Outside Interference?

A Botched Coup d'état

Yes, the Republicans could have won the civil war save for foreign intervention. Nobody planned a civil war. The 33 months of bitterly fought struggle were the result of a failed *coup d'état*. After losing the general elections in February 1936, the national bloc – formed by fascists, monarchists, conservatives and Catholics – abandoned the constitutional road to power (via the ballot box) and sought to destroy a left-wing and progressive Republic through violence. The following month, leading *africanistas* (colonial officers) gathered in Madrid to hatch the rebellion at the house of a parliamentary candidate for the dominant Catholic party (CEDA). They never anticipated a protracted confrontation. On the contrary, they assumed that their uprising would meet with prompt success. After all, Spain had a long record of praetorian take-overs, the last being staged by General Miguel Primo de Rivera in September 1923 which led to a military dictatorship until January 1930. They counted on the advantage of a surprise strike so as to eliminate those senior officers reluctant to break their oath of loyalty to the government. They could also rely on the mobilization of thousands of civilians, members of the different right-wing parties.

After the military rebellion began in the Moroccan Protectorate in the evening of 17th July 1936, it spread to mainland Spain during the following days. Although General Francisco Franco's propaganda suggested that divine providence guided the fulfilment of his holy crusade, there are sound foundations to speculate that without foreign intervention, the rebellion would have petered out.

After a week of bloody clashes, the military sedition had largely failed. With the exception of a few cities in the south and Oviedo (Asturias), the Canary Islands and the Balearics (with the exception of Menorca), the rebels or nationalists controlled only the traditionally conservative areas of Galicia, Old Castilla and Navarra, where the insurrection was greeted with enthusiasm. In contrast, a combination of the swift response of the unions and the loyalty of the greater part of the state police, security forces and senior army officers meant that nearly two thirds of the country remained in the hands of the Republic. This territory included the main capitals (Madrid, Barcelona, Valencia and Bilbao), the industrial northern and eastern

areas, the entire Mediterranean coast as far south as Málaga and the vast southern rural regions (Extremadura, Murcia, New Castilla and Andalucía). Furthermore, Spain's Air Force (albeit tiny) and the country's huge gold reserves (the fourth largest in the world) remained in the hands of the government. The Army of Africa, containing the fierce Foreign Legion and the *Regulares* (indigenous Moorish troops commanded by Spanish officers), Spain's most battle-hardened professional military force, led by General Francisco Franco, was paralysed by the problem of transport across the Straits of Gibraltar after sailors stayed loyal to the Republic, overpowered their officers and retained control of the fleet. Based on that correlation of demographic and economic resources, it seems reasonable to argue that the rebellion had its days numbered.

The Great Powers' Fateful Intervention

Lacking significant modern weaponry and any important arms industry, both sides rapidly looked abroad to obtain vital military supplies. Consequently, as Hispanist Paul Preston suggested, the response of the European Great Powers essentially determined the course and outcome of the war.¹

The first hints of foreign reaction favoured the Republic, after all the legally established government of Spain, a member of the League of Nations and most international forums. Both Italy, exhausted after its weary Abyssinian experience, and Germany, whose expansionist plans lay in central Europe and who had no significant interest in Spain, turned down the Nationalists' initial pleas for aid. At the same time, neighbouring France, ruled by a similar left-wing coalition (*Front Populaire*) under the socialist Léon Blum, appeared ready to help its Spanish counterparts and deliver weapons. However, the seemingly logical international context soon changed dramatically.

On 25 July, the French government reversed its initial stance. Crucial sectors of the economic and diplomatic establishment, the armed forces and the Catholic Church, sympathized with the Spanish rebels. Faced domestically with similar political polarization as Spain, there were fears that direct involvement in that conflict could induce 'patriotic France' to emulate its Spanish counterparts. Simultaneously, the Blum cabinet was under huge pressure from Britain, France's vital ally, to avoid arming the Republic, including warnings that if French activities triggered a war in Europe, she would find herself alone. Class, upbringing, and vast financial interests in Spain led the British ruling elites to loath the left-wing Republic. Moreover, both Stanley

Baldwin's existing administration and, from May 1937, that of Neville Chamberlain, were committed appeasing the fascist dictatorships. Tragically for the Republic, both Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini also undertook a radical about-face. On 25 July, a Spanish mission met the German dictator in his holiday retreat at Bayreuth where Hitler took the fateful decision to provide military aid. Two days later, the *Duce* also committed himself to the Spanish adventure. They both believed that the reward for what they first assumed would be a secretive and small-scale operation (a few but crucial transport planes, ammunition, pilots and advisers) could be huge: a vital ally in a strategically key area.

Fascist aid together with French paralysis altered dramatically what otherwise would have merely been the repression of ill-armed and isolated pockets of resistance. From early August 1936, German and Italian aircraft performed the first major airlift in history transforming a botched coup into the inexorable and bloody advance northwards of the Army of Africa's crack troops. In October, as they reached the gates of Madrid, the Republic seemed in the verge of defeat. However, the crucial impact of foreign intervention was revealed again as the timely intervention of the Soviet Union resulted in prolonging the conflict.

On 14 September, baffled by the passivity of the western democracies, the Kremlin abandoned its initial cautious approach, which was limited to displays of platonic support. It could not countenance the emergence of another right-wing dictatorship in Europe that, moreover, would seal the encirclement of its potential ally, France. Furthermore, Moscow regarded the successful defence of a Popular Front administration (the embodiment of the alliance between liberal bourgeois and communist parties) as the bridgehead towards a future understanding with the Allies founded on the common fear of Nazi expansionism. Simultaneously, the Communist International took advantage of the resounding international appeal of a besieged Republic, resisting a military insurrection backed by Italy and Germany, to organize the recruitment of volunteers to fight in Spain: the International Brigades. Communist parties were instructed to organise the enrolment and transport of individuals. Their success, attracting volunteers from 54 countries from around the world, was unique in modern European warfare. Apart from a small number of adventurers, most of them travelled to Spain to fight for what they considered the last ditch stand against the apparently invincible march of reaction in Europe.

The first deliveries of Soviet weapons and the psychological boost provided by the formation of the first International Brigades proved decisive. In November 1936, against all expectations, General Franco's troops were held at the gates of Madrid. Short of manpower and now facing a better-equipped enemy, Nationalist hopes for a swift capture of the capital and the conclusion of the war vanished. In fact, the stalemate in Madrid was a very serious blow for them. With their elite troops bogged down and badly crippled by casualties, the insurgents even contemplated defeat.

The Japanese Wife

The potentially fatal setback for the Nationalists in Madrid was gradually undone by the internationalization of the conflict. As the significant increase in foreign armament and manpower flowing into Spain transformed hitherto relatively small-scale armed clashes into major battles, the flawed implementation of a Non-Intervention Agreement sealed the Republic's tragic fate.

Despite ideological and strategic reasons and even glaring evidence of Italian assistance to the Nationalists, the French Popular Front's only response in August 1936 was an appeal to the other European powers to subscribe to a Non-Intervention Agreement (NIA) in Spain. This policy was regarded by the French government as the best available solution to withstand massive internal and external pressures, and keep the administration afloat. As André Blumel, Blum's chef de cabinet, noted: 'Non-Intervention was essentially an attempt to prevent others from doing what France was incapable of accomplishing'.² At that stage, the French prime minister believed that an effective arms embargo would help the Spanish government.³ In fact, it embodied France's retreat before British pressure and revealed in full its weakness.

Twenty-seven European nations agreed to abide by the NIA.⁴ In September, a working committee to supervise its implementation (Non-Intervention Committee, NIC) was established in London with the respective ambassadors in Britain acting as representatives of their nations. It became an exercise in public opinion, a smoke-screen behind which, to a greater or lesser extent, all the powers intervened in Spain. The Russian ambassador, Ivan Maisky, called the NIC the ideal Japanese wife: a woman, who sees nothing, hears nothing and says nothing.⁵

The NIC perpetrated one of the most outrageous diplomatic farces ever seen in Europe. Indeed, a committee intended to supervise an arms embargo consistently turned a blind eye to

flagrant breaches of the agreement. This included, in 1937 alone, evidence of Italian troops and equipment captured after their defeat in Guadalajara (March), the destruction of the small Basque town of Guernica by the German Air Force (April) and the euphemistically described ‘pirate attacks’ in the Mediterranean to refer to Italian submarines seeking to strangle the convoys of supplies bound for Republican ports (summer).⁶

In 1937, the initial largely chaotic and disorganized Republican forces had become an efficient Popular Army capable of mounting well-planned offensives that again and again surprised the enemy: Brunete (July), Belchite (September) and Teruel (December). However, small gains in the battlefields, followed by bloody stalemates and painful losses, revealed that the sheer material superiority of the Nationalists courtesy of the NIA prevailed over the Republicans’ courage and even tactical planning. Indeed, the crippling but biased embargo tilted the balance in favour of the insurgents. While General Franco obtained on credit crucial oil deliveries from the main Anglo-American companies and weapons from the dictatorships, the Spanish government had to send its gold reserves abroad (to France and the Soviet Union) to finance the war effort and rely on the black market and erratic and hazardous dispatches from the distant Soviet Union. Eventually, as the Mediterranean route became too dangerous, Russian weapons had to be dispatched to French Atlantic ports and then smuggled into Spain across the border. This led to permanent shortages of necessary supplies and over-priced and often obsolete equipment. In terms of manpower, the disparity was also colossal. Some 35,000 genuine volunteers, who had to be armed and trained, joined the International Brigades. Additionally, around 2,100 military personnel came from Russia. In contrast, nearly 80,000 Italians (*Corpo di Truppe Volontarie*), 19,000 Germans (Condor Legion) and 70,000 African mercenaries fought in the Nationalists ranks. They were professional soldiers constantly rotated and re-equipped.

The NIA’s blatant inefficiency was the consequence of being an instrument of British diplomacy whose objectives were not those portrayed by official propaganda – that is, the prevention of foreign participation in the war. It was created to ensure the confinement of the Spanish conflict. However, it also formalized the legal anomaly that a democratically elected government was on a par with a military coup, restrained the French from rushing to help its embattled sister Popular Front, eliminated a potential confrontation with the fascist powers and provided the perfect façade to conceal hostility towards the Republic, maintaining a semblance of impeccable neutrality for domestic public opinion.

Indeed, in the spring of 1938, it appeared to British statesmen that it was France's reckless behaviour, allowing the entry of military equipment to Spain through her border, and not the presence of Italo-German divisions that flouted the NIA's principles. British diplomacy therefore yielded a great success when, after the collapse of the French Popular Front, a new administration, led by Edouard Daladier, closed the border, the only safe channel of arms for the beleaguered Republic. Oliver Harvey, private secretary of Lord Halifax, the British foreign minister, wrote in his diary: 'We seem to be drifting into the position of allowing Russia to champion democracy while we seek to placate the dictators. The government are praying for Franco's victory'.⁷

The Republic's Fading Hopes

In 1938, the worsening of the international situation offered the Republic some glimmer of hope. On 12 March 1938, Germany annexed Austria (the *Anschluss*) and made plans for the next prize, the Sudetenland (Czechoslovakia). On 25 July, the Republican Army launched an ambitious offensive. Its troops crossed the River Ebro, taking the Nationalists by surprise, and establishing a bridgehead 40 kilometres into enemy territory. The Battle of the Ebro became the longest and bloodiest of the entire war. However, the fate of the conflict was ultimately decided in the European chancelleries.

As war seemed about to break out in Europe, Republican optimism contrasted with Nationalist gloom. On 27 September, after much hesitation, Franco reassured the Allies of his neutrality in the event of a continental conflict. However, they could not ignore the vast amount of Italo-German weapons and troops in Spain. Nationalist headquarters could not but dread that as soon as hostilities began on the continent the Republic would declare war on Germany and link its fortune to that of the Western democracies. The insurgents would then find themselves geographically isolated from their friends and starved of military supplies, if not at war with the Allies. In the event, the international situation could not have evolved more favourably for Franco. Despite the gravity of the crisis, appeasement prevailed. On 29 September, Chamberlain and Daladier met Hitler in Munich, with Mussolini acting as mediator. They agreed to Hitler's plans and the Czechs were brow-beaten into surrendering the territory the Germans wanted.

On 16 November 1938, the Battle of the Ebro ended. It had taken the Nationalists almost four months to regain the territory lost in July. Despite their material inferiority, the Republicans had

not been routed but morale had plummeted. Hopes of reversing the unfairness embodied by the NIA had been shattered in Munich. While the Republic could not replace its massive material losses, the Nationalists, promptly rearmed by Germany, launched a decisive offensive into Catalonia which concluded in February 1939. At that stage, the government still held 30 percent of Spain. However, the Republic did not fight until the bitter end but imploded when some leading political and military figures revolted in a deluded and vain attempt to negotiate a conditional end to the conflict. Clashes between rival Republican forces ruined the possibility of further resistance. The war officially concluded on 1 April.

Nationalist propaganda during and after the conflict succeeded in re-writing history. A military coup was described as a glorious crusade and its leader, General Francisco Franco, hailed as *Caudillo Invicto* (Undefeated Chieftain). In fact, based on material evidence Franco could not go down as a new Napoleon. It had taken him 33 months of steadfast struggle to succeed. Without thousands of African mercenaries, constant and massive Italo-German aid and the NIA's farce, the Republic would have won the war.

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¹ Paul Preston, *The Spanish Civil War. Revolution, Reaction and Revenge* (London: HarperCollins, 2006), p. 135.

² Cited in Georges Lefranc, *Histoire du Front Populaire, 1934-1938* (Paris: Payot, 1965), Annexe 17, 'La Non Intervention en Espagne', p. 464.

³ Anthony Eden, *Facing the Dictators* (London: Cassell and Company, 1962), p. 409.

⁴ The agreement was only subscribed by European nations. It was expected that the rest of the world would abide by the principle of non-exporting war material to Spain. The United States introduced a moral arms embargo on both Spanish parties in August 1936, formalised later into the Spanish Embargo Act and the Neutrality Act of January and May 1937 respectively.

⁵ Ivan Maisky, *Spanish Notebooks* (London: Hutchinson and Co., 1966), p. 33.

⁶ In fact, the Italians, informed by the Germans, were aware that British intelligence had broken their naval codes and knew them to be responsible for all the mayhem. *Documents on German Foreign Policy 1918-1945*, Series D, Vol. 3: *Germany and the Spanish Civil War*, (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1951), no. 418 (12 September 1937), p. 443.

⁷ Oliver Harvey, *The Diplomatic Diaries, 1937-1940* (London: John Harvey, 1970), p. 148.

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Growing up under the last years of the dictatorship of General Francisco Franco and then experiencing the democratic transition in the late 1970s, I became aware of the crucial importance of the civil war in the course of contemporary Spanish politics. Years later, while studying for my undergraduate degree in Britain I also realized the huge impact of that war outside its borders. Today, one can find a monument to the British volunteers in Spain right next to the famous London Eye. Nearly 70 years on, the constant flood of publications and academic polemic surrounding the subject testifies to its enduring effect and popular fascination. I trust you are all encouraged to read and learn more about this riveting fratricidal conflict.